

## ENHANCING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN UKRAINE

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**Abstract.** The use of English has become increasingly dynamic with the creation and expansion of new international networks of communication and the ubiquity of new technologies in and beyond the English-speaking world. This paper highlights the deficiencies of traditional Communicative Approach to foreign language teaching in Ukraine, and emphasizes the necessity to employ new educational technologies which are more efficient for teaching English as an international language, particularly in the academic sphere.

**Keywords:** communicative approach, enhanced approach, academic vocabulary, thinking skills.

**Анотація.** Використання англійської мови стає дедалі динамічнішим, зважаючи на створення й розширення нових міжнародних мереж зв'язку та розвиток технологій як в англomовних країнах, так і за їх межами. У статті висвітлено недоліки традиційного комунікативного підходу, застосовуваного у викладанні іноземних мов в Україні, та наголошується на необхідності запровадження нових технологій, які можуть підвищити ефективність навчання англійської мови як засобу міжнародного спілкування, зокрема у науковій сфері.

**Ключові слова:** комунікативний підхід, удосконалений підхід, академічний словник, навички мислення.

**Introduction.** Contemporary globalization processes have made English a *lingua franca* for today's world. Application of English in new and varied contexts throughout the world causes its rapid development which calls for new approaches to its theoretical studies and its teaching. This paper argues that in Ukraine the methods of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are sufficiently outdated, and do not keep pace with the development of global English and new educational technologies applicable in its teaching and learning. Meanwhile, Ukrainian English language learners (ELLs) are challenged with the competitiveness of today's global work-market, which requires a good command of English, and thus necessitates changes in the language classroom.

This paper provides an overview of the existing context for EFL teaching, and pinpoints the changes that take place in this field. A particular emphasis is placed on the need to develop new methods of teaching English that will become either satellites or substitutes of the widely used

**Communicative Approach.** Such methods should enable students to master English quicker and better, and use it in various professional and non-professional environments. Respectively, we should train teachers of English who, being in command of the new methods, are capable of their creative implementation, so as meet the requirements set by the global world to their students.

**Drift from communicative to other competences.** In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, teaching English as a foreign language changed its paradigm, and educators throughout the world focused on developing their students' communicative competence (the term was coined by Dell Hymes in 1966). Communicative competence in EFL means that a student is able to produce well-formed utterances to achieve his or her communicative intention in various speech acts – assertive, directive, expressive, etc. On the one hand, communicative competence is grounded on linguistic competence, or one's knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar. On the other hand, communicative competence implies one's acquaintance with the appropriate use of language in variable social contexts.

The Communicative Approach to teaching English (which was a methodological derivative of the theory of linguistic competence) was introduced into the language classroom through simulating students' communication with imaginary native speakers (NS) of English, which takes place in imaginary contexts and for imaginary purposes. Language learning tasks included building vocabulary for greetings, asking directions, using transportation, ordering food in restaurants, etc. Those students who required more detailed language training were supposed to follow an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) sequence, which provides students with linguistic skills necessary for particular professional fields. Introduction of the Communicative Approach triggered development of training materials which focus on typical communicative topics, such as greetings and farewells, weather and seasons, shopping, travelling, professions and hobbies among others. While discussing such topics, students practiced the language via role plays, thus attempting to attain NS-like fluency and raising their ability levels. The examples of respective curricula and textbooks are «Headway» series and «Total English», both popular in EFL contexts and still in use today.

During the previous 20<sup>th</sup> century, when people became more mobile internationally, the use of English grew exponentially, and it acquired the status of the major international language, or *lingua franca*, used for com-

munication by speakers who did not share their first language. The response to it in Europe was creation of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR or CEF) – a guideline representing the achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe and, increasingly, in other countries [1]. The European standard suggests six reference levels for grading foreign language proficiency of an individual, and these levels are considered by the authors of language courses and textbooks. While defining the levels of language proficiency, CEFR relies on a range of competencies (with «competence» having acquired the role of a metacategory in language teaching). CEFR distinguishes general competences (descriptive knowledge), and skills, as well as existential competences, including particular communicative competences – such as linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic competence. This range of competences partly overlaps with the earlier linguistic competences that served as foundation for a Communicative Approach to teaching English.

**Present-day challenges.** For Ukraine, English is a necessary prerequisite for a successful integration into global economy, no matter how remote this perspective is. In Ukraine, English is an indispensable part of a secondary school curriculum. However, what matters and what does influence its acquisition is motivation for learning English, and the learners' awareness of the beneficial role of English for both themselves and their country.

At present, English retains its dominant position in industries of business and technology, and its status as a major *lingua franca* will hardly change in the nearest future. Moreover, it is expected to be further raised with the world market being open for new generations of technical innovations – handheld computers and tablets, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), such as Coursera, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), etc. Under the circumstances, English becomes a necessary medium for obtaining information and data, and to access the recent achievements in different scholarly fields. Globalization of communication in personal, academic, scholarly, economic and other areas, which will further evolve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as emergence of new contexts and places of international cooperation, make teachers of English feel the necessity for updating their educational tools, so as the latter should be compatible with the new challenges of today's life.

Of late, EFL students have been increasingly enrolling in higher education in English speaking countries. In 2010, approximately 733,000 in-

ternational students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States [3], which is a 6 % increase as compared with the previous year. Yet, many students are not properly prepared to meet the strong demand for sufficient competence in academic English. For example, students, like those in Ukraine, where EFL is taught via application of the Communicative Approach, are faced with a mismatch between their communicative competence and the type of language required in academic and scholarly fields. This mismatch exposes inadequacy of simulated interactions with imaginary native speakers in imaginary settings, which may have only a distant resemblance to real on-line interaction of native and nonnative speakers of English. Another problem is attaining appropriate instruction in academic and professional English sufficient for passing an exam like GRE (Graduate Record Exam), obtaining a university degree and getting employed after graduation.

**Present-day facilities for ELLs.** Teaching English to contemporary students should be grounded on the contemporary needs. The entrenched Communicative Approach with its traditional methods should not be discarded, but it should be integrated into a broader spectrum of newly developed teaching techniques. The latter should be aimed at developing students' skills sufficient for both oral and written communication with real native and non-native speakers of English. Nowadays, such skills can be developed to some extent outside the language classroom. Students use English to have an access to online games and social networks (FaceBook, Instagram, as an instance), they use search engines for information, conduct research, watch videos (on YouTube), listen to audio samples, and read and write blogs. They use abbreviated English in text and chat messages (LOL, NVMD, JK, NP). They also de-code semiotic systems in gaming and advertising, thus exposing that, which in 1996 was dubbed "multiliteracies" by the New London Group. Such literacies include de-coding semiotic systems, as players do rapidly in MMORPGs. In online gaming, players are more likely to read the meaning behind symbols (e.g., treasure chests, pictures, maps, avatars) than behind words.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century EFL students are less likely to use static, printed textbooks than ever before. In Ukraine, many of such textbooks are outdated (published before 1991), but their replacement is expensive and therefore unaffordable. Access to multimedia technologies enables students to obtain up-to-date information without being heavily dependent on the printed sources.

At the end of the last century, when the Communicative Approach was gaining momentum, ELLs started to formulate questions as to the goals of English in Ukraine, the purposes of its learning, and the needs which it has to satisfy. At present, the answers to many of these questions seem to be obvious: first and foremost, English has to satisfy students' academic needs. Therefore, one of the contemporary demands is English for advanced academic purposes. However, Ukraine has no tradition in teaching it. Today, English language instruction should include courses of Academic English, which will make Ukrainian students capable to successfully cope with the international English language proficiency tests, such as GRE (Graduate Record Exam), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System). These tests are indiscriminate to the learner: EFL students are expected to have the proficiency level similar to that of native speakers. Such tests is a part of the new reality.

Absence of solid courses in Academic English taught at Ukrainian high schools and universities is partially compensated by students' access to open online courses (MOOCs), which, on the one hand, help many young Ukrainians to enter the best world universities, and on the other hand, demonstrate what kind of English has to be taught in Ukraine. One of the top Ukrainian technical universities, «NTU Kyiv Polytechnical Institute» on its website encourages students to take 25 on-line courses in English, among them Computer Science, Software Engineering, Human-Computer Interfaces, and Machine Learning. Comments posted by students who had taken these courses expose the problems which they encounter: incomprehensibility of some lecturers' English, specific vocabulary, interruption of the lecture with tests for its understanding, etc. These comments pinpoint the issues to be included into the course of Academic English, which should focus not only on the vocabulary and grammar typical of different academic genres, but also on the composition of academic texts and a variable manner of oral academic presentations.

**Enhancing English language teaching in Ukraine.** To test knowledge of school-leavers, Ukrainian system of secondary education employs the External Independent Testing (EIT), similar to GSCE in the UK and ACT or SAT in the US. Independent testing in English, as a part of EIT, was developed on the grounds of International English Language tests, particularly the FCE – the First Certificate in English Cambridge test (level B2 in the Common European Framework). However, due to

technical difficulties, Ukrainian EIT has retained only the reading, writing and English use sections, and has omitted the listening and speaking sections. The first test, held in 2009, showed great discrepancy between English learned at school and English required by the EIT. The major concern was the low level of performance, which is partly explained by outdated textbooks written by proponents of the Communicative Approach and focused on the initial acquisition of English through reading texts which provide the vocabulary and grammar.

Building the vocabulary is a major part of language learning. However, the traditional way of memorizing unstructured lists of words copied out of the studied text is ineffective. The techniques that may enhance efficiency of both memorizing the vocabulary and its further use in speech are as follows:

1. The most used words should be taught directly, without reading a text. Students are advised to compile an Academic Word Lists. Moreover, they should be allowed to choose the words they will learn. In order to comprehend a text, students have to understand 95–99 % of all words on a page. However, not all students have the same vocabulary learning needs. At reading lessons teachers may divide students into small groups each of which has to decide what words they would like to learn, taking into account a particular topic to be discussed or a particular text to be read. This may be also done by an individual student who can select the words from a dictionary using his/her own strategy. Students should not «guess» word meanings, as the Communicative Approach prescribes. They should look up these meanings in an on-line dictionary linked to the text.
2. Vocabulary enhancing techniques have to be coupled with higher order thinking skills (HOTS) that combine language and thinking development. Reading a text not only for comprehension, but also for development of logical thinking will sufficiently enhance language acquisition in its various aspects – systemic (acquisition of the vocabulary and grammar), text-building (acquisition of the rules for developing a cohesive and coherent text), and communicative (adapting the text message to the communicative needs and communicative social settings).

**Conclusion.** The use of English in new societal niches and by new international speakers, as well as acquisition of English by students with new motivational incentives and through new technological media demonstrate an urgent necessity to reconsider the traditional approaches to

language teaching and, hence, to training teachers of English. Presumably, the new approach to teaching English in Ukraine should be compatible with bilingual education wherein students learn the academic content through English and thus gradually improve their speaking, listening, and writing skills. In this way, students learn increasingly complex and content-specific vocabulary and syntactic structures. They are taught to analyze texts from various genres and to use language academically and socially, locally and globally.

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